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The complex legacy of italian former asylums and judicial psychiatric hospitals

Case-study of the judicial psychiatric hospital of Saint Ephraim in Materdei, Naples

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Synopsis

The present document deals with issues concerning urban voids but more precisely on those caused by the disposal of the Italian asylum and judicial psychiatric hospital heritage. In it, we try to understand the possibilities that architecture has, with the project, to systematize all the disciplines involved in the regeneration process of the latter, referring to the case study of the former judicial psychiatric hospital of Saint Ephraim in Naples.

Key words: Heritage, Asylum, Regeneration, Hope.

1. The Italian Asylum and Judicial Psychiatric Hospital Heritage

To talk about architectural heritage, its protection and enhancement, as well as what may be future scenarios for its probable use once its original function has come to an end, means to investigate spaces or single episodes of the contemporary cities that are dotting the urban fabric, in relation to the contemporary changes of the city. With this paper, we want to focus specifically on those voids generated by the divestiture of Asylums heritage and above all on that of the *judicial psychiatric hospital*¹ that characterize many cities of the peninsula. These voids are similar to black holes in the urban structure because, if the former are "the terminal phase of the evolution of a star of great mass surrounded by an intense gravitational field that does not let neither matter nor radiation escape", the latter are what remains of architectural occurrences of great prestige surrounded by tangible or abstract boundaries that make them invisible to the community. Therefore, focusing on the Italian judicial psychiatric hospital assets and on the process of disposal that has invested them since L.81 / 2014 and paying attention to the effective closure of all the structures in 2017, we realize that the legacy of this process includes the complex question of the conservation and protection of a problematic heritage.

A reality still alive to this day, proof of a piece of history of our country, endowed with great evocative force and repository of collective and individual memories, fears, prejudices, caused by the stigmatization of mental illness. It is evident, however, that the recovery of such a complex heritage gives the opportunity to rethink the city's space and triggers a process of acceptance of the painful past. Working with these voids means, first of all, to investigate the heritage in its materiality and morphology; to make a critical interpretation in view of the need for protection and for new uses. Moreover, in triggering a process of regeneration we are compelled to make the different kinds of knowledge interact at various levels of the project, managing a complex task that has strong, social and economic consequences. In the case of asylums and Judicial psychiatric hospitals, we are also confronted with buildings characterized by complicated morphologies and certain spatial characteristics that cannot be underestimated. A building designed to restrain people is a building that has clear and distinct borders, it does not look for visual contact with the outside. It is an introverted building built from a sum of spaces that often avoid themselves rather than communicate. The articulation of the paths is complicated and sectoral: it is often interrupted and broken by the thousand of reconstructions that affect and reflect the changes in the conceptions of psychiatry. However, if on the one hand the project clashes with all these problems, on the other hand, these same buildings are the promoters of the rebalancing of unbalanced areas and strategic resources thanks to their position, size and value.

¹ The Judicial Psychiatric Hospital – in Italian Ospedale Psichiatrico Giudiziario – is a category of prison house that in Italy in the mid seventies (DPR 29/04/1976 n. 431) replaced the old asylum for criminally insane. This category, dependent on Italian penitentiary administration, was abolished in 2003 but finally closed in 2015 after L. 81/2004

1.1 The case of the judicial psychiatric hospital of Saint Ephraim in Materdei-Naples

Among the many buildings on Italian territory affected by decommission, following the failure of the model of the Judicial Psychiatric Hospitals, I choose to treat the case of the Former Psychiatric Hospital of Saint Ephraim (Fig 1) which was also the study subject of my degree thesis.



Figure 1.

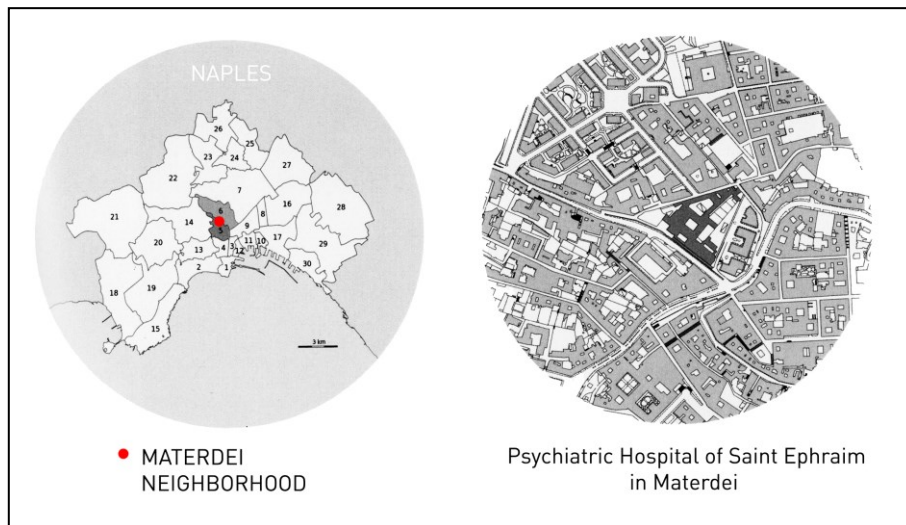


Figure 2.

The building is located in the Materdei district of Naples (Fig 2), an important link between the ancient city and the twentieth-century high neighborhoods, and tells a story that covers a time span of more than 400 years, from the year of its foundation occurred around 1572 up to today. Over time, the building has undergone various changes regarding its intended use. It was a convent until the suppression of the monastic orders following the anticlerical politics of the Kingdom of Italy; barracks from 1865 to 1975; finally, psychiatric Hospital from 1975 to 2008, the year of its closure. Rooted in the

neighborhood, but always used for different purposes from its nature, since its destination as O.P.G it has been perceived as a hostile place to be avoided. Therefore, the large building, out of scale compared to the residential fabric of the district, has undergone a process of abandonment and transformation, which turned it into a huge and degraded void, even if it is a place rich in historical stratifications and memories. Nevertheless, the story of the Saint Ephraim Complex is a particular story: suddenly, after years of oblivion, it was occupied in 2015 by the collective CAU - Napoli that gave life to the "Ex O.PG. Je So Pazzo", an association with the aim of re-appropriation of the building and return it to the neighborhood by promoting activities for the community. The occupation, that obtained political legitimacy from the municipal administration, has triggered a process of subtraction and arrangement of the building: an episode of popular action to transform the complex into a common good, no longer individual property (the building was State-Owned), but collective. The thesis work, which had as its objective the elaboration of a project of global re-functionalization of the building, has its genesis in an in-depth morphological analysis of the complex and an identification of the denied but possible relationships with the neighborhood. Since the preliminary studies conducted with two other colleagues, it has been evident the need to treat the huge complex as a unitary organism, but at the same time to imagine an installation in it of different functions, obviously compatible with the plant, to reconnect it with the urban fabric. The project proposal moves from the consideration of three fundamental aspects: conservation of the memory, reconnection to the existing fabric, reinforcement of the functions destined to the community already started by the occupants. Hence, the proposal to work synergistically throughout the building, but trying to overcome all the limits of a reclusive structure. Then the creation of a museum of memory, narrative of the history of the building and its past as a psychiatric hospital, located in the cells and rooms of the church of the former convent. A dorm, in the part once reserved for military housing, to cope with the lack of university accommodation in the historic center of the city, where many universities are located. Finally, a social-housing complex for the residential nature of the neighborhood and the housing emergency (Fig 3). The most relevant issues undoubtedly concerned the accessibility, the rethinking of margins, the rethinking of internal and external connections. The thesis experience has also allowed us to understand the potential of this structure and the necessary involvement of different actors: from the administration, to the citizens, to all the professional figures involved in the design, up to other possible stakeholder. The re-functionalization of a building of this size certainly triggers a process of redefinition of the structures and polarities of the neighborhood and Architecture, with the project, leads the processes and systematize all the disciplines involved in them, towards the re-appropriation of space and the achievement of new social and economic balances.

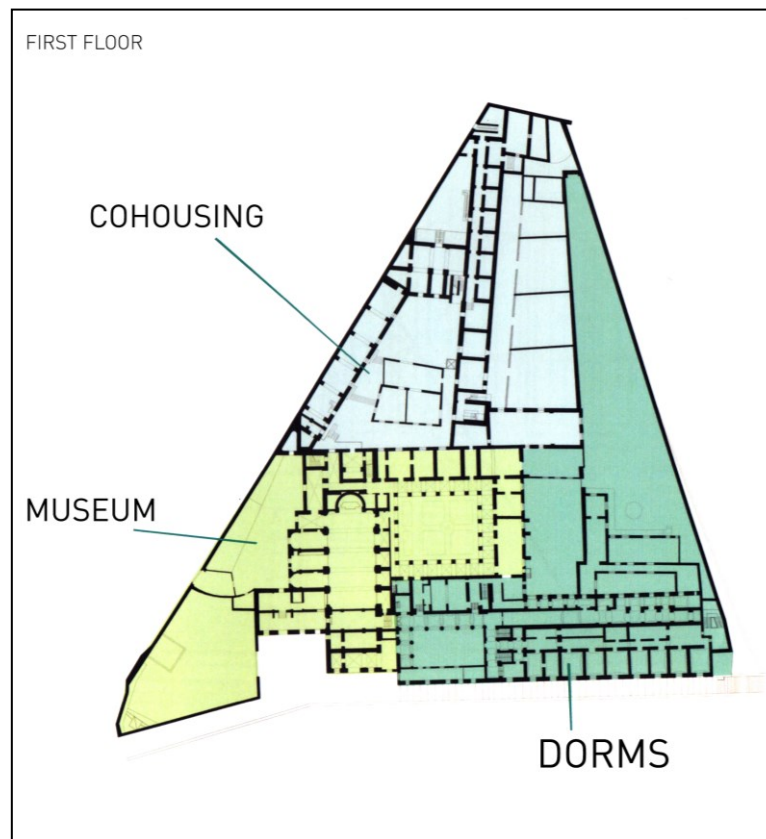


Figure 3.

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Biography

Antonella Barbato. PhD student in Architecture at the University of Naples "Federico II", class 1991, she collaborates in the architectural composition courses of the architecture department, held by Professor Marella Santangelo. After graduating, with a thesis in architectural design on the judicial psychiatric hospital of Saint 'Ephraim in Naples in 2017, her research is currently focused on penitentiary architecture.